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The U.S. Role in Global Security

The Mayo Clinic, not the Emergency Room

by John Hillen

Conclusions

While many different proposals have been put forward outlining a post-Cold War security identity for the United States, most do not characterize an American role in terms of either excessive activism or dangerous isolationism. However, some basic concepts are fundamental to outlining a practical middle path between those two poles:

- Although many factors will influence America's decisions about when, where, why, and how to use military force, national interests should have greater significance than either altruistic motives or crusading impulses.
- Absent a threat to national interests, strategic policy will be constrained by a persistent desire among Americans to remain the premier global power while also demonstrating a growing reluctance to bear the costs of being a global gendarmerie.
- The United States must take advantage of its leadership position through various alliances coalitions, and international organizations. The interests of allies, the roles they wish to play, and their military capabilities, as well as a mature understanding of the capabilities and roles of international organizations and other transnational forces, should be important considerations in the formulation of U.S. strategy.
- There is only one hard and fast geostrategic rule that stands the test of time: political actors will almost always assume roles and responsibilities that reflect their interests and capabilities. States or international organizations which live beyond their means or act in a way that outstrips their interests cannot sustain military commitments.
- Because the United States cannot lead in every facet of global security, a new role must be fashioned. The "Mayo Clinic" role envisages America atop a hierarchy in which the members of a cooperative system assume complementary roles that match their roles to interests and capabilities. This system, representing good management principles as well as sound leadership, frees the Nation to concentrate on the more consequential military tasks of global security in

which only it can lead, and yet offers unique and decisive U.S. support for the lesser tasks of regional and local security.

There is an old Taoist proverb which claims that to accomplish a series of daunting tasks, you must know who you are, what resources you have at your disposal, and the order in which you should take on the tasks. In a global security arena—that calls on the United States to deter rogue states in the Persian Gulf and East Asia, balance the growing power of China, hedge against events going sour in Russia, lead and conduct all manner of humanitarian interventions in failed or failing states, lay down a security shield over key global systems, protect the homeland against attack, and prepare for future challenges—this proverb remains sage advice.

Who You Are

America's search for a post-Cold War security identity has produced a wide-ranging and fascinating debate that often resembles swinging for a piñata. Not only is every contestant equally disadvantaged in knowing where the piñata is or what it looks like, but everyone is armed with the same stick with which to swing away. Given the wide range of "answers" provided, no one observer or school of thought can be said to have a great advantage over the others in searching for this elusive target. Thus far the contest has seen clashing civilizations, reluctant sheriffs, tempted superpowers, coming anarchies, agile strategies, benevolent hegemonies, unipolar movements, multipolar movements, pasts as prologues, America coming home, history ending, imperatives of leadership, and every variant of neo(add movement here)ism imaginable. The debate has shifted the template of political camps as they relate to foreign affairs, and, against a background of relative disinterest on the part of the body politic, provided a rich vein of ideas, plans, and visions.

Nonetheless, the practical necessities of governing narrow the choices considerably and the public policy world is left to deal with fairly pragmatic alternatives that represent a middle road somewhere between the poles of isolationism and excessive activism. In his masterpiece *Diplomacy*, Henry Kissinger proposed that the answer to *Who You Are* can be found in a history of the always present tension between America's altruistic values and calculated national interests. A modern-day strategist, however, should not necessarily be concerned with answering *Who You Are* through a weighty historical analysis or psychological self-examination of the American nation (although Walter McDougall's *Promised Land, Crusader State* is highly recommended). The day-to-day bottom line of *Who You Are* is manifested not only in the interplay between America's crusading impulses and its need to protect national interests, but in what Robert Tucker referred to as "the great issue of American foreign policy today. It is the contradiction between the persisting desire to remain the premier global power and an ever deepening aversion to bear the costs of this position." Seen in a less pejorative light, this "contradiction" is in fact a very reasonable desire on the part of the American people to have a post-Cold War security policy that preserves American involvement in global activities that benefit the United States but does not squander U.S. resources on an unfocused and wasteful campaign of global gendarmerie. I'd offer that the criteria for determining this equation are most readily found in *Which to Do* (below).

Who You Are also depends in large measure on who you think everyone else is. Identifying the roles, interests, capabilities, and sundry imperatives driving other actors in the global arena will greatly influence the identification of an American role in the world. The American role is guided by some immutable values and interests, but is not constant in and of itself. It will shift and change based upon the roles and actions of allies, potential and real adversaries, international organizations, other nongovernmental groups, and certain transnational forces. America's perception, both real and received,

of the role that should be played by the likes of the UN, the Organization on Security and Cooperation in Europe, Japan, South Africa, the Khmer Rouge, large multinational corporations, and all other global players will shape its view of its own role considerably.

In all those calculations, there really is only one constant principle on which the United States can start to define its role in the global security arena: **political actors will most often assume roles and responsibilities that match their interests and capabilities**. This constant may occasionally be violated, but has a way of enforcing its own equilibrium. After all, a political entity can act (usually detrimentally) in a way that outstrips its interests or its capabilities for only so long. For instance, this may be a situation at which the United States will soon arrive in Bosnia. Current U.S. policy maintains that the United States must continue to do the heavy lifting in Bosnia as long as there is an international military force there. The rationale for staying remains the same as it was for going in the first place: the possibility of a brutal war in "the heart of Europe"—an area of vital interest to the United States. Nonetheless, apparently the brutality of a renewed war is not quite so imminent, and the Balkans not quite so in the heart of Europe, that the European powers are willing to stay engaged if the United States leaves or shifts to the role of junior partner. This incongruity of roles, responsibilities, interests, and capabilities in Bosnia is becoming more apparent as time goes on. Thus, the question Congress recently asked the President really is: "At some point in this Bosnia intervention shouldn't we see that the ultimate resolution is at least a little more important to the Bosnians and then to the European powers than to the United States?" It is a fair question.

The role that the United States should play in the complex and unpredictable global environment of the post-Cold War world must be one that avoids both damaging isolationism and wasteful activism. To chart this middle course that carves out a unique role for the United States and, at the same time, leaves some important security concerns to the leadership of others, the United States must recognize that, despite "the imperative of American leadership," the United States cannot lead everywhere. Therefore the United States must recognize that there is a hierarchy of organizations involved in global security and that this "system" runs on one principle imperative: that every actor's "jurisdiction"—its roles and responsibilities—will generally match its interests and capabilities. In security affairs the United States sits atop the system. It is after all, the power with the most far-reaching national interests and the most potent military capabilities. Allies and international organizations in which the United States is involved make up the rest of the hierarchy—a cooperative system of countries and organizations who play important supporting roles.

The role that the United States should assume in global security can be compared to that of the Mayo Clinic in health affairs, the FBI in law enforcement, or the Supreme Court in the judicial system. In each of these systems, these organizations assume leadership in a hierarchy of involvement that includes organizations on more local levels. These systems conduce to order because there are clearly defined demarcations of responsibilities that are natural to the interests and capabilities of each level. Each system has a built-in "triage" capability that allows the various organizations in the system to discriminate between which illness should be cured where (or when), which crime should be investigated by whom, and which case should be tried in which court. Like the Mayo Clinic in an unhealthy world, rather than make military house calls for every case of insurgent heartburn or colic, the United States should support the local "doctors" who fill that function as the need arises. Moreover, the United States, as the only organization in the system capable of doing so, should be committed principally to leading interventions where the "illnesses" are truly consequential and when the unique and decisive capabilities of the American military are critical.

This global security system is somewhat self-enforcing, but can be upset when powers in the system act

in ways that do not match their interests and capabilities—when organizations live outside their means. A good example is the experience of the United Nations between 1992 and 1995. Then the great powers (led by the United States) and an ambitious UN Secretary-General elevated the UN to a strategic role that put more weight on the organization than it could bear. Burdened by attempting to manage tens of thousands of combat troops in several complex, expensive, and dangerous military operations, the UN failed and was greatly discredited. The entire episode prevented real progress on collective security and placed the UN back on the whipping post of American public opinion.

The United States, as the premier military power in the world, can help to keep the global security system on track by clearly laying out its own military role as well as leading powerfully and managing creatively in its alliances and in the international organizations to which it belongs. As is examined below, the United States painting itself into a corner in Bosnia and then being held hostage by its allies and the local factions does not satisfy the prerequisites of good leadership or effective management. The United States cannot and should not do everything. For the most part, it should attend to larger security problems worldwide while it supports its allies and like-minded countries who have responded first to global security needs in their own regions. In a hierarchical and cooperative system, the role the United States plays is unique. While many countries can exercise power in local military affairs, only the United States can deter and defeat major power aggression in any region of the globe. Maintaining its primacy in this area will require a fair and honest estimation of *What You've Got* and *Which to Do*.

What You've Got

Unlike the answer to *Who You Are*, the answer to *What You've Got* is a relatively fixed target at any one time. The tools of U.S. power—economic, diplomatic/political, cultural, and military—can be measured for the most part. While this paper deals almost exclusively with U.S. military power, several points on the other manifestations of power are worth noting. First, while the United States is the unchallenged economic juggernaut of the world for now, its economic power is in relative decline. The U.S. share of world GDP has fallen from almost 50% to just over 20% in the past 50 years. U.S. political and diplomatic muscle has seen a similar relative decline since the end of the Cold War. As Kissinger noted, "America is more preponderant than it was 10 years ago, yet, ironically, power has also become more diffuse. Thus America's ability to shape the rest of the world has actually decreased." The other point worth noting is that most economic and almost all cultural power is nongovernmental and (thankfully!) not controlled by government agencies but by hundreds of thousands of private enterprises.

However, the federal government still has a mono-poly on strategy, both in setting the goals and determining the means. In terms of military power, the combination of bureaucratic momentum accumulated during the last 50 years and the search for the "peace dividend" has ensured that in the post-Cold War era the United States will basically have what it did during the Cold War era—only less. Details over force structure and budgets need not be re-hashed here. Suffice it to say that *What You've Got* is currently inadequate for: 1) what the U.S. national security strategy states it is able to do today; and 2) the need to prepare for the future. The Quadrennial Defense Review did not change the fundamental problem of the Bottom-Up Review which, as Andy Krepinevich wrote, is a plan "that offers insurance we probably do not need, at a cost the Clinton defense budget cannot afford. Equally disturbing, it may not insure us against the security challenges that we are most likely to face beyond the five-year coverage period."

Moreover, the current disconnect between ends and means in U.S. strategy is placing an undue strain on the U.S. armed forces, and, when combined with the need to modernize, has produced the "train wreck" scenario of which so many in the defense community speak. A force some 40% smaller than that in 1990

is expected to deter (and win if need be) two nearly-simultaneous major theater wars as well as undertake all manner of peacekeeping, humanitarian relief, and other crisis management operations. So far as I can see, it is not working and the U.S. remains quite fortunate that no collision of events has called this bluff. Current U.S. strategy violates two of Walter Lippmann's famous axioms. The first is that America should keep its "means equal to her purposes and her purposes equal to her means." The second axiom reflected prudence beyond that equilibrium: that the United States should have a surplus of means as a hedge against the unexpected. In order to reach either of those stages, the United States must work to bring its means (*What You've Got*) and ends (*Which to Do*) back into balance.

In this day and age, with budget considerations superseding any sort of strategic requirements, *What You've Got* remains at best a fixed constraint. The variables that can most readily be shifted therefore, in order to demarcate an American role in global security, are those concerned with *Which to Do*. It is here that a strategist can truly operate, and it is here a strategist must appreciate that (given those fixed or declining resources) the essence of American statecraft in the post-Cold War world is discrimination about where, when, why, and how to use American power. This is especially so with military power.

Which To Do

The denouement of Kissinger's *Diplomacy* neatly sums up the key challenge to U.S. policymakers in formulating a constructive and sustainable role for the United States in the global security arena. "Not every evil can be combated by America, even less by America alone. But some monsters need to be, if not slain, at least resisted. What is most needed are criteria for selectivity." In lieu of providing criteria, an exercise that has been done by many elsewhere, this paper offers some guiding principles for ensuring there is some selectivity in the use of U.S. military power that ultimately will lead to the Mayo Clinic role.

Separate the Wheat from the Chaff. The United States should prioritize its national security interests and give clear focus to vital and more important national security interests rather than expending its power in may-work interventions on the world's fringes.

Keep Your Eye on the Ball. The absence of clear and present dangers and the CNN-effect [the influence of news media coverage on foreign policy] will cause U.S. strategists to become myopic and focus on the most likely, but least consequential security challenges. The focus should be the opposite.

Recognize Who is On the Team and Get the Most Out of Your Players. The United States leads many allies who have different interests and different capabilities. At the same time, it has unique responsibilities and capabilities unmatched by other like-minded states. Sound management principles would recognize that the leader should not do everything or lead everywhere, but should support the lead efforts of others where their interest is greater and their capabilities more suited.

Know Where You're Going and Finish the Job. A U.S. military force involved in any operation should be pursuing clearly defined, achievable, and sustainable goals. The force should have the operational freedom to be the prime determinant of its own success and should not be hostage to its environment.

Bring the Nation Along. U.S. forces should never be deployed into dangerous operations in the absence of public and congressional support. Such support gives the deployed forces staying power in the event of difficulties. The U.S. public is not casualty averse in missions that are important. If the reasoning is sound, the public and Congress will support the mission.

Dr. John Hillen, the Olin Fellow for National Security Studies at The Council on Foreign Relations, presented a longer version of this paper at an NDU symposium on Strategy and the Formulation of National Security Policy, Oct. 7 - 8, 1996. For the complete paper, contact the author at jhillen@cfr.org.

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